

Essex-born John is best known for his 1961 number one, *Johnny Remember Me*, and for starring in *The Great Escape* alongside Steve McQueen. Now 69, he lives in West Sussex with his wife Diana. They have two grown-up children



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

John Leyton

I only ever wanted to be an actor, probably because my parents were involved in showbusiness. My mother was an actress and my dad owned cinemas and theatres.

"Regrettably, my parents split up when I was six and, eventually, I went to live with my dad and stepmother in north London. After leaving school, I studied drama at The Actors' Workshop. To help pay my fees, I worked as an extra in various films, including *The Square Peg*, with Norman Wisdom, and *Doctor At Sea*.

"Robert Stigwood, who later managed The Bee Gees and Cream, was setting up as an agent and he took me on. It was through him that I landed the part of Ginger in a series of *Biggles*, for Granada.

"The show was a great success but Mr Stigwood decided I had the looks of a pop star and introduced me to legendary record producer Joe Meek, for whom I recorded *Johnny Remember Me*. Soon after, I got a part in a popular TV show called *Harpers West One*, set in a big

department store. I played a pop singer called Johnny St. Cyr (pronounced Sincere) who was brought in to open the store's new record department.

"Robert Stigwood suggested that Johnny should actually sing his latest record on the show and the TV people agreed – so *Johnny Remember Me* fitted in perfectly. With that kind of exposure, the record took off instantly. It shot to number one in 1961 and stayed in the charts for weeks.

"More hits followed but my career took a new turn when I got the part of Willie, the tunnel king, in *The Great Escape*. Most of my scenes were with Charles Bronson but I did spend time with Steve McQueen.

"Next came *Guns At Batasi* and then *Von Ryan's Express*, which was shot in and around Rome and in Hollywood. I panicked a little when I first arrived on set because my very first scene was with Trevor Howard... and Frank Sinatra!

"Later I moved to Hollywood and lived there for 10 years. I made more films and had my own TV series. I even met Elvis.

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"Eventually things had run their course and I returned to London. But, by then, I was out of the loop, so I moved into business, with interests in film production, property and restaurants.

"I thought my performing days were long gone but, in 1993, I was asked to join the Capital Gold Anniversary Concert bill at the Royal Albert Hall. I hadn't sung for 30 years so I was rather reluctant. But I was persuaded and the whole thing was fantastic. I have done several 60s revival tours since then and still perform regularly in my own shows.

"In a way, my career has come full circle because I have a small part in *Telstar*, the film about the tragic life of my old pop producer Joe Meek. As a spin-off, next year I will probably be touring with The Tornados, the group that had the huge 1962 hit with the Meek-produced *Telstar*. I don't need to keep performing but I do it because I enjoy it, even after all these years."

Neil Bonner

For more information and news about John, visit www.johnleyton.com.



John can be seen in forthcoming Joe Meek biopic *Telstar*

PHOTOGRAPHS: REIDERS/WIREIMAGE